

#70, Change and Anxiety

By Alvin Petty, retired area minister

By the 16th-century, Western Europe was immersed in an age of change and anxiety that would transform how they viewed and used the Bible and how they experienced the world. Innovations and inventions abounded in many fields. Their cumulative effect was tremendous.

A new world had been discovered by Iberian explorers. Astronomy was mapping the heavens, and technological developments were giving Europe more control over its environment. Medieval sensibility was being replaced by a pragmatic, scientific spirit.

Catastrophies abounded and many felt helpless. The Black Death had killed at least a third of Europe's population. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks had conquered Christian Byzantium (Constantinople, etc). Papal scandals were horrendous. In the Avignon period, there were three different Popes' claiming the power of Peter simultaneously. This caused some to flee the established church. All

this made it impossible for many to be religious in the traditional way, and this affected their reading of the Bible and created new biblical scholarship.

The West was creating a civilization that was unprecedented in world history. As is always the case on the threshold of a new era, many longed to return to the well springs of their culture, which were the classical world of Greece and Rome and early Christianity. The philosophers and humanists were very critical of most medieval piety and the Catholic scholastic theology, which they found dry and abstract (amen!). They wanted to return to the Bible and the early fathers of the church.

Generally, a humanist is one who exalts the positive values of humanity and believes that proper education of humanity will lift people to their proper place in the scheme of things. It can elevate them into salvation. The Christian humanists of the period had drunk deeply of the scientific spirit of the age and began to study their Bible very objectively, especially the Greek New Testament.

The greatest Christian humanist of this era was the Dutch priest, Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), who published the Greek New Testament and translated it into beautiful Latin, which revealed the many errors of the Catholic Vulgate translation.

Erasmus, through his trans-

lations, writings and anonymous plays, which poked fun at the corruptions of the Papacy and Catholic Church, sought to reform Christianity from behind the scenes, believing that if he and others could educate the people, they would turn from the errors of the Church. Martin Luther admired Erasmus. The newly invented printing press made Erasmus's influence upon people like Luther of vast importance. Great religious reform was coming!

#71, The Bible in the 16th Century

In the early sixteenth century it had become fashionable for scholars to read the Bible in its original languages. This requirement helped develop a more impartial, less emotional attitude towards biblical antiquity.

Up until this time, exegetes had viewed the Bible as a single work rather than a collection of very different books. Most had never seen the scriptures physically in a single volume. The centuries long practice of students' picking out of context essentially different, unequal biblical verses and linking them together, had encouraged scholars to downplay the different visions and historical periods of the Bible. Many Jewish and Christian students of the Bible had done this for a long time.

Many of these sixteenth century scholars were humanists like Erasmus. They began to study the biblical authors as individuals, paying attention to each one's special talents, mental constitution, personal peculiarities and mannerisms.

These exegetes were especially drawn to Paul, who wrote in the common language (koine) Greek of the people and exhibited a direct pertinence and relevance to his present time, place and purpose. His passionate seeking of the way of salvation was to them a most satisfactory

countering to the dry scholastic rationalism that dominated their theological landscape.

Humanists in this period were not like modern humanists, who are often skeptical of religion. These became dedicated followers of Pauline Christianity. They resonated with Paul's deep sense of sin, for they lived in a time when everything about their society was disappearing and being replaced by a new age with new social, political and religious structures. They could not see clearly which way they were going, but they could feel the tremors of shift and change of their society's very foundations.

A general distress ruled everywhere. John Calvin (1509-64) and Huldrych Zwingli suffered from a sharp sense of failure and powerlessness until they broke through into a new religious approach. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuits, wept so much that doctors warned he would lose his sight. Others were burdened with worry that their stains of sin would never be cleansed.

Perhaps the greatest and most creative case of angst was in a young Augustinian German monk in the monastery of Erfurt, Martin Luther. Luther, as we shall see, drew also mainly from the Pauline writings of the New Testament.

#72, The Legacy of the Fearful Monk

Martin Luther said of his anxiety and fear, "Although I lived a blameless life as a monk, I felt I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God. I also could not believe that I had pleased him with my works. Far from loving that righteous God who punished sinners, I actually loathed him...My conscience would not give me certainty, but I always doubted and said "you did not do that right. You were not contrite enough, You left that out of your confession."

These were the words of a man in great psychological distress. Luther was often his own worst enemy.

Luther and later John Wesley, though truly great men, left us a legacy of wallowing too much in their own sense of sinfulness before they had a birth into a new level of God consciousness in their lives. This has influenced much evangelical preaching to focus too much on our own sinfulness and not enough on God's grace and work within. It has sometimes caused some to be born into the spiritual life through a harsh c-section when a smooth natural birth could have been had. I call this depressing tendency spiritual navel gazing when God would get our minds on better things.

Luther (1483-1546) had been educated in the scholastic philosophy of William Ockham (c. 1287-1347), who had urged Christians to try to merit God's grace by their good works. And Luther tried so hard, but his quest only led to terrible depression and fear. None of the usual suggested pieties of the Church could calm his extreme fear of death and Hell.

The thing that finally saved Luther was his disciplined study of scripture. He was a grown man before he ever saw a copy of the whole Bible. He was surprised by how many different writings it had. He was seeing the Bible as it actually was for the first time.

He became a professor of Scripture and Philosophy at Whittenberg University. Between 1573-1578, he taught the Psalms and Paul's epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians. This study led to his religious breakthrough in understanding the Pauline doctrine of justified before God by grace through faith. This insight was a new birth for him and it changed our world.

This breakthrough insight freed him from his Ockhamite prison of seeking to earn God's grace by his good works. It continued to Page 6

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Weather

Neoma Williams
U.S. Weather Observer

	Hi	Lo	Pr
Thursday	45	20	
Friday	70	22	
Saturday	78	31	
Sunday	49	20	
Monday	63	20	
Tuesday	77	24	
Wednesday	76	29	

January moisture.....	Tr
February moisture.....	0.08
2014 moisture.....	0.19
2013 moisture.....	1.59